

## **'As luck would have it'**

Story by Jude Brazendale, air-to-air  
photography by Jon Davison

# As luck would have it ...

**FRESH TO THE WORLD OF RESTORED WARBIIDS, WRITER JUDE BRAZENDEALE PRESENTS A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE OF HER HUSBAND JON DAVISON'S AIR TO AIR PHOTO SHOOT OF A ROYAL NEW ZEALAND AIR FORCE PBV CATALINA, DURING WANGANUI'S VINTAGE WEEKEND.**

Not your average Sunday activity for most, but lucky for those who get to do it. And on a recent Sunday I was one of the lucky ones! The chance of a flight in a PBV Catalina, no less, a WW2 amphibious flying boat.

On Saturday afternoon my husband Jon happened to be in our back garden when he heard the unmistakable deep throbbing sound of a Catalina overhead.

Spontaneously he decided to contact the NZ Catalina Preservation Society to find out who the pilot was, to pitch the idea of doing an air to air photo shoot over Wanganui. Luckily the pilot, Brett Emery, was keen as well.

So Sunday morning saw us out at Wanganui airport ogling some seriously vintage aircraft. An ex NAC DC-3 or Dakota was taking passengers for a few laps over the town, Richmond Harding's spirited little kit-set built Spitfire did some nippy manoeuvres without losing any rivets, and John Luff's menacing Venom blasted off like a rocket and screamed overhead, while his son Darren in his tiny Pitts Special wowed us with a stomach lurching aerobatic ballet. But it was the Catalina that

we had come to see and she didn't disappoint us. I immediately liked her, she wasn't exactly pretty but I felt she possessed a strong maternal aspect, like someone you could rely on, who would never let you down. I noticed she had impressive extra long wings like an albatross, especially good for staying in the air for extended periods of time, and transparent domes at the back which I discovered are called blisters, and give an excellent view of what lies above and below.

Called "the wandering witch" she is a stately relic from WW2 that can lumber through the sky for up to twelve hours due to a huge fuel capacity, land and take off on water, or rough airstrips, and has been used to dump vast

amounts of water on forest fires in Europe, although not Australia.

Not to mention her original multiple roles in long distance search and rescue for downed pilots, as an anti-submarine hunter, a maritime patrol and a torpedo bomber; she's literally an old war bird.

We found the pilot, Brett, and after a quick confirmation of the photo shoot, he introduced us to Dee Bond, who agreed to be the camera plane in her classic Cessna 180. She was initially a little surprised, I think, at the suggestion of taking the passenger door off, one of Jon's prerequisites for getting optimal unimpeded subject shots.

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**ABOVE:** Jude boarding the PBV. **RIGHT:** Jude's portrait of Brett in his office.



Dee soon warmed to her role however, and during our chat I discovered how passionate she is about flying, she has been a pilot for over 30 years, including 20 years as a Catalina pilot. She won the 2017 all-women trans-continental Air Race Classic in USA and is also an international director of the 99s, the largest all women pilots organisation in the world. As a platform to encourage women pilots, she proudly told me that the number of female Saudi Arabian pilots has recently grown from twelve to two hundred.

Jon suggested to Dee that I fly with them in the camera plane, but I took one look at the cramped back seat and instead suggested that if there was room in the Catalina I'd much prefer that experience. Dee agreed that the Cessna wasn't suitable for a passenger, especially with the door removed for the photo shoot, and luckily there was a spare seat on the Catalina.

It was a bit awkward climbing on board, the Cat after all wasn't originally designed as a passenger plane, and I found myself ducking and squeezing in through a large window, then

clambering inelegantly over metal dividers to my seat near the back. Glancing around I noticed that it was all very sparse and functional, no frills or optional extras. As one of the Catalina crew opened a small air hatch in the roof, I commented on the hi tech air conditioning. Before take off he gave us some information about fuel capacity and the plane's uses. I was wondering what it would be like to land on the ocean but was told that in order to avoid salt water corrosion the Cat only landed on fresh water. We were then informed that we would be able to move around the cabin once the plane was airborne and we'd all have a chance of sitting in the blister which afforded the best views.

So after waiting for Jon and Dee to take off we were soon galumphing down the runway and ascending surprisingly easily up into the sky. Once in the air the Cat assumed a graceful aspect and arced elegantly over the ocean. I looked out the window trying to locate the Cessna but it wasn't visible from this angle. Before long a group of us was told we could unfasten our seat belts and move into the blister

for a better view. The area was quite spacious, with padded bench seating along the sides. This was where the machine gunners of yesteryear would have been positioned. I tried to imagine how I'd feel if I was on my way into a war zone with the high odds of not surviving. A sobering and terrifying thought.

I had wide views left and right, above and below, everything seemed so close, sky, sea, river and city were all spread out before me. The Cat stayed low in the sky beneath the clouds so I could easily distinguish many features of Wanganui, the Bastia hill tower, the bridges, the Waimarie plying the river and the beach at Castlecliff, although unfortunately I couldn't make out our house. Suddenly I spotted the little Cessna swerving into view on the left. I was hoping Dee would be able to fly close enough for Jon to get some good shots of the Cat. I waved to the plane in case he could see me and managed to take a few photos of it before we had to move back into the front section to let others into the blister.

I was feeling quite exhilarated and certainly reflecting on how lucky I was to have had this exciting opportunity. Towards the end of our flight when one of the Cat crew asked if we had any final questions I quipped can we go again?!

Jude Brazendale

Grateful thanks to Lawrence Acket, Brett Emeny and Dee Bond from the NZ Catalina Preservation Society.



**TOP:** Dee Bond and her Cessna 180. **CENTRE:** The flight deck view from the PBY to the Cessna. **LOWER:** The PBY and DC3 at Wanganui. **RIGHT:** Touch down at Wanganui.

